

WESTERN SAHARA

MINE ACTION REVIEW

CLEARING CLUSTER MUNITION REMNANTS 2025

KEY DATA

NO CCM ARTICLE 4 DEADLINE:

Not party to the CCM

CMR CONTAMINATION:

1.73KM²

Light
(National estimate)

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS

Release of cluster munition-contaminated area	Release in 2024 (km ²)	Release in 2023 (km ²)
Clearance	0.49	0.27
Technical Survey	0	0
Non-Technical Survey	0	0
Destruction of submunitions during clearance, survey, and spot tasks	2024	2023
Submunitions destroyed	354	33

MAIN CMR SURVEY AND CLEARANCE OPERATOR IN 2024:

- SafeLane Global

KEY DEVELOPMENTS

Clearance output nearly doubled in 2024 compared to 2023, largely due to the suspension of operations during the first five months of 2023, which had limited productivity. While the renewed conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco has remained low intensity, with no recorded use of cluster munitions, previously unrecorded cluster munition remnants (CMR) continued to be found, with 111,115m² of cluster munition-contaminated area identified in 2024.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

- The Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) should reaffirm in writing its commitment to respect and implement the Convention on Cluster Munitions (CCM), including clearance of all cluster munition remnants (CMR), consonant with its international human rights obligations. This commitment should include annual submission of voluntary Article 7 transparency reports.
- The Sahrawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) should finalise and adopt the newly drafted strategy, ensuring it includes a revised deadline for completion of CMR clearance, annual survey and clearance targets, and a detailed budget.
- Greater support should be provided to SMACO to enable it to continue coordinating mine action in Western Sahara east of the Berm and to ensure that the remaining explosive ordnance contamination is addressed.

CLUSTER MUNITION SURVEY AND CLEARANCE CAPACITY

MANAGEMENT

- Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO) [Western Sahara, east of the Berm]
- Royal Moroccan Army [west of the Berm]

NATIONAL OPERATORS

- Royal Moroccan Army

INTERNATIONAL OPERATORS

- SafeLane Global

OTHER ACTORS

- United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS) Western Sahara

UNDERSTANDING OF CMR CONTAMINATION

According to the United Nations Mine Action Service (UNMAS), at the end of 2024, Western Sahara east of the Berm¹ had a total of 37 confirmed hazardous areas (CHAs) containing CMR, covering a total of 1.73km².² This is a 17% decrease from 2023 and reflects the clearance that took place in 2024. Both the north and south of Western Sahara east of the Berm are still affected by CMR, as summarised in Table 1.³

Table 1: Cluster munition-contaminated area east of the Berm (at end 2024)⁴

Region	CHAs	Area (km ²)
North	22	0.77
South	15	0.96
Totals	37	1.73

The Royal Moroccan Armed Forces used both artillery-fired and air-dropped cluster munitions against Polisario Front military forces during their conflict in Western Sahara from 1975 to 1991. According to the SADR, the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces employed BLU-63, M42, and Mk118 submunitions at multiple locations in Bir Lahlou, Dougaj, Mehaires, Mijek, and Tifariti.⁵ UNMAS reported that submunitions have also been found in Agwanit.⁶

In November 2020, Morocco sent troops into the UN-monitored buffer zone to end Polisario Front supporters' three-week blockade of the strategic Guerguerat road. In response, Polisario withdrew from the almost 30-year-long ceasefire and renewed attacks on Moroccan military units.⁷ To date, the renewed conflict between the Polisario Front and Morocco has been of low intensity, without any recorded use of cluster munitions.⁸

But while CMR clearance had been projected to be completed by the end of 2012,⁹ discovery of previously unrecorded contamination meant this target date was not met. According to UNMAS, new strike areas have continued to be identified since 2013 as mine action activities continued and additional information was received from local populations.¹⁰ In 2024, two new cluster munition-contaminated areas totalling 111,115m² were identified and released.¹¹

Of the 37 recorded CHAs, seven cluster munition strike areas are located inside the buffer strip and are inaccessible for clearance.¹² Clearance of mines and explosive ordnance (EO) in the buffer strip and along the Berm itself is not foreseen in the United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) mission agreements.¹³ After the resumption of hostilities, the Polisario Front also issued instructions that clearance of mines and EO could not take place in restricted areas.¹⁴

OTHER EXPLOSIVE REMNANTS OF WAR AND LANDMINES

Western Sahara also remains significantly affected by other ERW and mines due to the conflict (see Mine Action Review's *Clearing the Mines* report on Western Sahara for further information).

1 A defensive wall (the Berm) was built during the conflict between the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Sagouia el Hamra and Rio de Oro (Polisario Front) forces, dividing control of the territory between Morocco on the west, and the Polisario Front on the east.

2 Email from Elhadji Kebe, Chief Mine Action Programme, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

3 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

4 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

5 SADR Voluntary CCM Article 7 Report, dated 20 June 2014, Form F.

6 Email from Artyom Harutyunyan, Head of Project Unit, UNMAS – MINURSO, 11 June 2024.

7 International Crisis Group, *Time for International Re-engagement in Western Sahara*, Middle East and North Africa Briefing No. 82, 11 March 2021, at: <https://bit.ly/3mPYgl>.

8 Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

9 Email from Karl Greenwood, Chief of Operations, Action on Armed Violence/Mechem Western Sahara Programme, 18 June 2012.

10 Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.

11 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

12 Ibid. The buffer strip is an area 5km wide, east of the Berm.

13 "Report of the Secretary-General on the situation concerning Western Sahara", UN doc. S/2017/307, 10 April 2017, p. 8.

14 Email from Artyom Harutyunyan, UNMAS – MINURSO, 11 June 2024.

NATIONAL OWNERSHIP AND PROGRAMME MANAGEMENT

UNMAS Western Sahara, formerly the MINURSO Mine Action Coordination Centre (MACC), facilitates MINURSO monitoring of the ceasefire and ensures the safe passage of UN personnel. On 31 October 2024, under UN Security Council Resolution 2756, MINURSO's mandate was extended for an additional 12 months until 31 October 2025.

UNMAS Western Sahara serves as the UN focal point for mine action activities within the MINURSO area of operations.

Its contracted teams work only in areas east of the Berm. The Royal Moroccan Army conducts its own demining in areas west of the Berm. In 2013–14, the Polisario Front, with UN support, established the Saharawi Mine Action Coordination Office (SMACO), which is responsible for coordinating mine action activities in Western Sahara east of the Berm, excluding the buffer strip.¹⁵

FUNDING FOR CMR SURVEY AND CLEARANCE

In 2024, SMACO received funding from the Kingdom of Spain to cover its running costs and UNMAS received funding from MINURSO for its clearance activities.¹⁶

GENDER AND DIVERSITY

UNMAS has reported that gender policies are implemented in accordance with UNMAS, UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS), and MINURSO guidelines, as well as with direction from the Polisario Front.¹⁷ UNMAS has a gender strategy as part of its overall country strategy with a work plan and system to monitor its implementation.¹⁸ UNMAS also reported that gender has been mainstreamed into Western Sahara's national mine action work plans and the SMACO 2019–23 mine action strategy.¹⁹ During survey, efforts are made to consider the needs of men, women, girls, and boys to ensure more effective and efficient operations, despite challenges presented by conducting survey activities targeting Bedouin populations.²⁰

UNMAS reported equal access to employment for qualified women and men in survey and clearance teams in Western Sahara east of the Berm, including for managerial level/supervisory positions. In 2024, there was one woman employed by SMACO and eleven (14%) by SafeLane Global (UNMAS's contractor), including eight in operational roles (14%) (see Table 2).²¹ This is unchanged from 2023.²²

Through SMACO, UNMAS also supports the Saharawi Mine Action Women's Team (SMAWT), an all-female organisation working on risk education in Rabouni and the five Sahrawi refugee camps. All national deminers, both male and female, are ethnic Sahrawi.²³

Table 2: Gender composition of SMACO and SafeLane Global in 2024²⁴

Entity	Total staff	Total women staff	Total managerial or supervisory staff	Women managerial or supervisory staff	Total operational staff	Women operational staff
SMACO	5	1 (20%)	2	0 (0%)	0	0
SafeLane Global	77	11 (14%)	17	2 (12%)	57	8 (14%)
Totals	82	12 (15%)	19	2 (11%)	57	8 (14%)

¹⁵ Response to questionnaire by Sarah Holland, UNMAS, 24 February 2014, and email, 25 February 2014; and email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.

¹⁶ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

¹⁷ Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018.

¹⁸ Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

¹⁹ Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.

²⁰ Emails from El Hadji Mamadou Kebe, NPA, 4 May 2019 and 14 March 2018.

²¹ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

²² Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

²³ Email from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 30 March 2021; and SMAWT newsletter, March 2022, at: <https://bit.ly/3yN542U>.

²⁴ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

ENVIRONMENTAL POLICIES AND ACTION

There is no national standard on environmental management in mine action, but SMACO have a policy on environmental management with a requirement that all implementation plans consider environmental impacts.²⁵ UNMAS Western Sahara does not have an environmental management policy but reported that environmental impact is considered as part of the tasking process and implementation plan in order to minimise potential harm from demining activities.²⁶ This includes waste disposal procedures for rubbish and grey and

black water disposal; how and where to set up camps; and how to dismantle camps without leaving an operational footprint.²⁷

Risks from extreme weather such as high temperatures and sandstorms are factored into the planning and prioritisation of survey and clearance tasks. Operations are halted during sandstorms; during periods of extreme heat, teams start earlier and work shorter hours.²⁸

INFORMATION MANAGEMENT AND REPORTING

The Information Management System for Mine Action (IMSMA) database for Western Sahara, east of the Berm, was upgraded to IMSMA Core in 2022.²⁹ All data have been successfully migrated to the new database. Review and verification of the data, which began at the end of 2023, was ongoing at the time of writing.³⁰ In addition, a process is now in place to validate any newly submitted information from the implementing partner.³¹

PLANNING AND TASKING

SMACO 2019–23 mine action strategy for Western Sahara east of the Berm, included no specific objectives on CMR, but it set goals toward a Western Sahara free of mine and ERW impact, including effective accident data collection, sustainable funding by 2020, and adequate staffing.³² These goals were not achieved.

SMACO has developed a new Mine Action Strategy 2024–2028 and UNMAS is supporting SMACO in reviewing and updating the strategy in line with the political and regional

developments.³³ A mine action work plan was in place for UNMAS in 2024, developed by UNMAS Western Sahara, in support of MINURSO's mandate.³⁴

UNMAS and SMACO identify priorities for clearance of both minefields and cluster munition strikes east of the Berm in conjunction with MINURSO. Priorities are identified based on humanitarian needs for the safety and freedom of movement of local populations, while UNMAS Western Sahara facilitates the ceasefire and ensures the safe passage of UN personnel.³⁵

LAND RELEASE SYSTEM

STANDARDS AND LAND RELEASE EFFICIENCY

Local mine action standards were developed and finalised in 2016 by UNMAS, together with SMACO, and in coordination with mine action partners. UNMAS reported in 2019 that translation of the standards into Arabic had been completed and shared with SMACO.³⁶ UNMAS said that the standards are reviewed annually but that no updates were made in 2024.³⁷ An external quality management system was in place from 2018 and implemented by UNMAS and SMACO to the east of the Berm.³⁸

OPERATORS AND OPERATIONAL TOOLS

SafeLane Global was the sole implementing operator for UNMAS Western Sahara in 2024.³⁹

²⁵ Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 18 June 2020.

²⁶ Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 21 March 2022.

²⁷ Email from Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 24 May 2022.

²⁸ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

²⁹ Emails from Leon Louw, UNMAS, 4 February 2022; and Nadine Husseine, UNMAS, 30 May 2023.

³⁰ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

³¹ Ibid.

³² SMACO, "Strategic Plan 2019–2023", at: <http://bit.ly/38jaGm2>; and email from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 31 July 2019.

³³ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Emails from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March and 5 May 2018; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 6 August 2020.

³⁶ Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Dandan Xu, UNMAS, 28 June 2019.

³⁷ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

³⁸ Emails from Robert Thompson, UNMAS, 29 April 2019; and Edwin Faigmane, UNMAS, 28 July 2020.

³⁹ Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

Table 3: Operational clearance capacities deployed in 2024⁴⁰

Operator	Manual teams	Total deminers	Comments
SafeLane Global (for UNMAS Western Sahara)	2	24	No change from 2023*
Totals	2	24	

* Two teams have been deployed since 23 May 2023 when demining operations resumed.

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS AND PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

LAND RELEASE OUTPUTS IN 2024

No CMR-contaminated area was released through survey in 2024 or the previous year.⁴¹

In 2024, 12 cluster munition-contaminated areas totalling 490,100m² were cleared with the destruction of 354 submunitions.⁴² This represents an 81% increase from 2023 when five cluster munition-contaminated areas totalling

270,100m² were cleared along with the destruction of 33 submunitions.⁴³ The increase is due to the suspension of demining operations during the first five months of 2023, which reduced productivity compared to the fully operational year of 2024.⁴⁴

Table 4: CMR Clearance in 2024⁴⁵

Region	Operator	Areas cleared	Area cleared (m ²)	Submunitions destroyed
North	SafeLane Global	3	36,200	3
South	SafeLane Global	9	453,900	351
Totals		12	490,100	354

PROGRESS TOWARDS COMPLETION

Western Sahara is neither a State Party nor a signatory to the CCM—it is not recognised as a State by the UN Secretary-General and therefore cannot formally adhere to the treaty—and hence does not have a specific clearance deadline under Article 4. However, the SADR submitted a voluntary CCM Article 7 transparency report to the UN in 2014, stating that “the SADR would like to reaffirm its commitment to a total ban on cluster munitions as well as its willingness to accede to the Convention on Cluster Munitions and be bound by its provisions”.⁴⁶ The SADR has obligations under international human rights law to clear CMR as soon as possible.

Western Sahara’s draft strategy aimed to release all cluster munition strike areas east of the Berm (outside the buffer strip) by 2019,⁴⁷ and UNMAS had expected to clear all CMR

in the Northern Sector by end-2018.⁴⁸ These targets were not met. SMACO’s 2019–23 strategy set a new vision of being mine and ERW impact-free by 2023, which was also not met. A new strategic plan 2024–2028 plan has been developed, but UNMAS has stated that due to the current political and security situation, it is challenging to estimate a completion date for clearing mines and explosive ordnance in Western Sahara.⁴⁹

Additional challenges include maintaining consistent support for funding, capacity-building, and access to new clearance technologies, all of which are vital to improving clearance efficiency. Alongside demining, UNMAS Western Sahara, as part of the MINURSO mission, provides 24/7 emergency response to EO-related incidents, as well as logistical support in response to mission requests.⁵⁰

40 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

41 Emails from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024 and 29 April 2025.

42 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

43 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

44 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

45 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 16 May 2024.

46 SADR Voluntary CCM Article 7 Report, Form F, 20 June 2014.

47 Emails from Virginie Auger, UNMAS, 29 March 2017; and Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 31 March 2018.

48 Email from Graeme Abernethy, UNMAS, 1 March 2018.

49 Email from Elhadji Kebe, UNMAS, 29 April 2025.

50 Ibid.